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THE

Battle of **W**illiamsburg

AND THE

CHARGE OF THE **24**TH VIRGINIA,
OF EARLY'S BRIGADE.

—BY—

COLONEL RICHARD L. MAURY.

The Immortal Twenty-fourth.—The Yankee General Hancock said that the Fifth North Carolina and the Twenty-fourth Virginia, for their conduct in battle before Williamsburg, ought to have this word inscribed upon their banners. The Twenty-fourth in the fight of yesterday vindicated its title to this honor. * * * *—*Richmond Enquirer*, June 2, 1862.

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The Battle of Williamsburg and the Charge of the Twenty-fourth Virginia of Early's Brigade.

The Immortal Twenty-fourth.—The Yankee General Hancock said that the Fifth North Carolina and the Twenty-fourth Virginia, for their conduct in battle before Williamsburg, ought to have this word inscribed upon their banners. The Twenty-fourth in the fight of yesterday vindicated its title to this honor. * * * * *—*Richmond Enquirer, June 2, 1862.*

The narratives of Colonel Bratton, of the Sixth South Carolina, and of Colonel McRae, of the Fifth North Carolina, published in the *Papers* of the Southern Historical Society for June and August last, describing the charge made by a small part of Early's brigade [the Twenty-fourth Virginia, supported by the Fifth North Carolina] at Williamsburg, upon a redoubt on our extreme left, defended by General Hancock with five regiments and ten guns, affords a proper occasion to record an account of the achievements there of the Twenty-fourth Virginia infantry, which bore the principal part in that action. This regiment opened the attack, drove the enemy before it, although his force was eight or ten times theirs, silenced his fire, and having advanced within twenty yards of the redoubt, was only stopped by orders from the division commander. Its daring and its dash won from the Major-General (D. H. Hill) this hearty commendation: "The courage exhibited by the Fifth North Carolina and the Twenty-fourth Virginia made too a wonderful impression upon the Yankees, and doubtless much of the caution exhibited in their subsequent movements was due to the terror inspired by the heroism of these noble regiments. History has no example of a more daring charge. * * * * * It contributed largely to detain McClellan, to demoralize his troops and to secure our retreat from a vigorous and harassing pursuit." And the commander of the forces attacked, General Hancock, declared that it should bear the word "immortal" upon its banner forever.

The authors of the narratives referred to have failed to give this regiment the exceedingly prominent and conspicuous place in that charge to which accident and its own valor entitle it. The charge of Early's brigade was the charge of the Twenty-fourth Virginia, and the enemy's whole resistance was directed against its attack. This is evidenced by the fact that its whole heavy loss was incurred in its advance, while the Fifth North Carolina, the only other regiment of the brigade in the fight, in its gallant *advance*

to support these Virginians, suffered scarcely at all, although in *returning* its losses were perhaps heavier. The writer, therefore, formerly Colonel of these sturdy mountaineers [at that time Major and commanding during the latter part of the action—Colonels Terry and Hairston having been wounded], feels that his duty to his gallant comrades, who so freely shed their blood on every field from Manassas to Appomattox, demands that he should show their title to the pre-eminence won by their valiant deeds in the estimation of friend and foe, and preserve in lasting memorial the proofs thereof. The more so, perhaps, because, owing chiefly to the active campaign upon which it then entered, no report or description, so far as known, of the part taken by this regiment at Williamsburg, has ever been made. None of the writer's superior officers witnessed the entire fight, for all were wounded before its close, and being himself wounded a few weeks afterwards at Seven Pines, he made no detached report of the Williamsburg charge. A very thrilling account was published by the newspapers of the day of the part taken by the Fifth North Carolina, which attracted much attention and is now on record; so that the future historian, unless a careful critic as well, finding no description of the charge of the Virginians, would naturally conclude that they bore but a subordinate part.

The Twenty-fourth Virginia infantry was one of the very first organized of the Virginia regiments. It was composed of companies raised in the mountain counties of Southwest Virginia, and as General Early was its first colonel, it was, particularly in the first days of the war, often spoken of as Early's regiment. It was formed in June, 1861, at Lynchburg, and proceeded forthwith to Manassas, where its Colonel was soon given a brigade, to which this regiment was attached. The appearance of this brigade upon the enemy's left flank at Manassas is stated by General Beauregard to have been the signal for the giving way of his line and the commencement of his flight.

The regiment remained encamped near Union mills during the following winter, picketing the railroad near Burk's and Fairfax stations, and in the spring moved with the army to the Rappahannock and then down on the Peninsula. When it reached the Yorktown lines, it mustered for duty some seven hundred muskets. Its field officers were Colonel William R. Terry, of Bedford, promoted from captain of cavalry for gallantry at Manassas, a dashing soldier of many a battle whose scars he bears to this day; Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Hairston, of Henry, a very Bayard in looks

and bearing, who was desperately wounded in the forefront of the charge at Williamsburg, and Major Richard L. Maury, of Richmond, the writer.

The regiment served with increasing distinction from Manassas to Appomattox Courthouse. In the van at the former, it was also at the post of duty and honor at the latter, where its few ragged, battle scarred, limping survivors, heroes of a hundred victories, with hearts still as stout and courage as high as ever, with the writer, then their Colonel, laid down those bright muskets and gleaming bayonets which had been so eagerly seized just four years before to defend the rights and liberties of their dear Virginia, and with which so well had they done their *devoir* that even in submission the world admired and all brave hearts applauded their dauntless deeds.

At odd times, when the Army of Northern Virginia was inactive, the brigade of which this regiment formed part—and which, from its earliest engagements, seemed to have attracted the attention of its commanders and gained their special confidence—went to Suffolk, North Carolina and Drury's Bluff in successful quests of glory and renown. After it was reorganized in 1862, Kemper commanded it, and Pickett was its Major-General until the sad disaster at Five Forks (1865).

At Yorktown Early held the lines just outside the village. Out-numbered as the Confederates were, the incessant duty necessarily imposed upon them in picketing, skirmishing and constant watching by night and day without relief, was wearing and arduous in the extreme. The weather was wet, the troops without shelter, the trenches full of mud and water and the supplies but scant. This exposure and hardship, greater than they had ever borne and so different from their snug quarters at Manassas, was quickly followed by sickness and disease, so that during the three weeks in the Yorktown trenches the seven hundred muskets of the Twenty-fourth Virginia were reduced to something like five hundred effectives.

On the retreat to Williamsburg, commencing the night of May 3d, Early's brigade was the rear guard—and the Twenty-fourth, being the left regiment, brought up the rear of all—the most fatiguing place, as every soldier knows, of the whole line of march.

All this was truly an ill preparation for the desperate charge to be set before them so soon; but let it not be forgotten in reckoning the glory of their deeds.

The horrible roads are well remembered even now by all who passed them on that dark and rainy night. There had been constant rains for weeks and ceaseless use of every highway all the while. The mud and water were ankle and sometimes knee deep, and infantry were often called to help the weary horses drag wagons and artillery from holes and ruts in which the wheels had sunk up to the very axles. So the march was tedious and dragging and slow. The men fell asleep on the wayside as they halted for a moment, and sometimes not a mile in an hour was made. Thus morning found them scarcely half way to Williamsburg [fourteen miles], and midday had long gone by ere the rear passed through the gray old town, and, weary and jaded, were allowed to take whatever of rest a halt in an open field a mile or so beyond and a tentless bivouac in the pelting rain might afford. Supperless but not to sleep they lay upon the soaking ground that night, and without breakfast, weary, wet and hungry, but jolly in spirits, they are ready at daylight to resume their march.

General Johnston had no intention of tarrying at Williamsburg, nor was the place defensible, for the enemy now had control of both James and York rivers on either flank and intended to push Franklin's division (30,000), kept on transports below Yorktown so as to move in a minute, rapidly up the York to West Point in the vain hope of getting in our rear. Our orders were that Magruder should not halt at all and that the other divisions should take up their march to the Chickahominy at early dawn—Longstreet being in the rear. So Smith moved on at day, then the trains followed, and Hill's infantry were filing into the road when orders came to halt and then to return to town.

The enemy's van had come up and was disposed to skirmish with the rear guard—fresh troops were arriving every moment—there was no time to wait to deliver a regular battle, for Franklin was already sailing up the York—but our trains were not well away and 'twas deemed prudent for Hill to tarry as Longstreet might need aid; doubtless, too, General Johnston was not unwilling to turn and deal the enemy a blow to show how little demoralization his backward movement created, and how, though in retreat, his men were quite as ready and as able too to fight as when on a victorious advance. Thus Hill's trains went on, but his infantry and some artillery returned to Williamsburg and the former stacked their arms upon the college green and passed the day in waiting and expectancy, while the rain still fell and fell.

Longstreet was being pressed more vigorously, the skirmish was becoming a fight just beyond the town and could be distinctly heard by all, and wounded and ambulances and prisoners passed frequently by. Every one looked for orders to the front each moment; amid such scenes and sounds the tension of expectation and excitement was most intense; meantime evening, dark, gloomy and cloudy, drew slowly on, when, suddenly, about three o'clock galloped up the looked for courier. "Move quickly to the support of Longstreet," said he.

And now were seen a series of blunders by generals which, as often after, the priceless lives of our gallant soldiers were sacrificed to correct, and which in this brilliant Williamsburg charge caused the useless slaughter of the very flower of Early's brigade—for though it need never have been made, yet it ought to have been a grand success, and to have resulted in the easy capture of Hancock's whole command, had due precaution been taken before commencing the attack and proper skill displayed in arranging, conducting and supporting it after it had been commenced. To make this clear one should recall the surrounding circumstances.

The prudent forethought of General J. B. Magruder, who, with his troops, had so successfully held the lines from Yorktown to Mulberry island since the war began, had caused the construction of a cordon of redoubts just below Williamsburg, running entirely across the Peninsula from Queen's creek of York to James river. Commencing near Saunder's pond on the York side near where the road crosses it, this line runs northwest for a mile or more, in which space are three redoubts; then due west some three hundred yards, passing another to Fort Magruder with several outlying smaller works, and thence westwardly in an irregular course, skirting a stream and swamp, some two miles more, passing six redoubts to the road leading to Allen's wharf on Jame river. The centre of this line was Fort Magruder, a large, well constructed closed earth-work, located about one mile from Williamsburg on the main road running down the Peninsula, which, just beyond, falls into the Yorktown and the Warwick roads.

The redoubts to the right, on the James river side, were all occupied by Longstreet's division, which relieved Hill—guarding the rear on the 4th—and whose obvious duty was to cover all the lines on which the enemy could advance. But this was not done; for on the morning of the 5th none of these left works were occu-

pied in force, and only one or two of the nearest even with pickets.*

Thus the left of the Confederate line of works, like that of the English at Preston Pass, was undefended, and one of the few passes across the swamps stretching along its front remained entirely open to the enemy. The redoubt constructed expressly to guard this passage seems not to have been considered worth a thought in the morning, when it could have been occupied without a loss, while in the evening the lives of hundreds of the best of soldiers were thrown away in a fruitless attempt to regain it.

Why were these redoubts not occupied? They were constructed for just such an occasion; for it was well known that the Yorktown lines would have to be evacuated sooner or later. General Johnston, in his narrative, pages 122-4, says he knew nothing of them, and so does Longstreet, and Hill, and Anderson, although they were all charged with their defence. Each is in sight from the other, and all are in a continuously open space. McLaws, of Longstreet's division, who occupied this part of the line the afternoon before with Kershaw's and Semmes' brigades, knew of them, for Colonel Marigny, with his Tenth Louisiana, occupied this very work [see McLaws' report of the battle of Williamsburg] until relieved by R. H. Anderson. Colonel Bratton, of the Sixth South Carolina, of Anderson's brigade, whose regiment was posted near the glacis of Fort Magruder, knew of them; for he reported them unoccupied [see his narrative—*Southern Historical Society Papers*, June, 1879]. It would be interesting to know to whom he made this report. He also saw the Yankees later in the day take possession of that on the extreme left. Moreover, all the army had entered this entrenched line at Fort Magruder, and when preparing to defend it, surely common prudence, not to say ordinary generalship, should have suggested the importance of ascertaining the position of its flanks; and it should not have been presumed, as seems to have been done, that so skilful a soldier as General Magruder had constructed but half a line of fortifications. And, indeed, the Commanding-General knew from the time he went to Yorktown, or very soon thereafter, that his army would soon withdraw [see Johnston's narrative, page 116], and this was the only road. It was apparent, too, that at or about Williamsburg would be the first halt, and it was to be expected that the enemy's van would come up with our rear here. If 'twas "prudent to construct these works"

* See Colonel Bratton's statement, *Southern Historical Papers*, June, 1879, page 299. General Anderson says in his report: "My not occupying these redoubt was perhaps a mistake, but I did not understand Lee's orders to include them."

[Johnston's narrative], would it not also have been prudent to ascertain their location?

But it is even stranger how Longstreet could have remained in ignorance of them, for they were in actual sight from Fort Magruder, where he must have been both on the 4th and 5th. As McLaws occupied them on the 4th, why did not Anderson, who relieved him, occupy all the posts he occupied? Who relieved Marigny's Tenth Louisiana and how came that relief to be withdrawn afterwards? Can it be that Bratton, who was posted on the Confederate left on the 4th and 5th, relieved Marigny, who occupied this position, and that he was also in fault in not having occupied this left redoubt also? But all these mistakes, growing out of ignorance or carelessness, might have been avoided had General Magruder been assigned to the defence of the rear on that day, for he and his troops were perfectly familiar with the whole country—they had been stationed here all the previous autumn and winter, and had themselves laid out and built these very fortifications.

As the Confederate army entered these lines about noon of the 4th, Longstreet, who led the van, and, by the usual routine, would be in the rear next day, halted just within, while the remainder of the forces marched on past Williamsburg. In the afternoon the enemy's van appeared, driving in the cavalry, and McLaws, with Semmes' and Kershaw's brigades, went back to these lines, and the Yankee van retired. That evening McLaws was relieved, as already said, by R. H. Anderson, commanding the brigades of Anderson and Pryor. In the morning, after much skirmishing, without advantage to the enemy, he appeared on the right in force under Hooker, attacking with spirit, but, though reinforced by Kearney, he was pressed back, driven and almost routed.* Here was fighting pretty much all day, but night found Longstreet holding his position, while the enemy seemed cured of any desire to again molest the Confederate rear.†

* Testimony before Congressional Committee on Conduct of War. Part I, pages 353-569.

† On the retreat the van of to-day is the rear guard to-morrow. Such was the custom of the Army of Northern Virginia—and Longstreet having led the first day, was rear guard the second. Was he in *front* at starting because General Johnston had found him, as afterwards General Lee did, "slow to move," and therefore started him first? Possibly, for the evacuation of the Yorktown lines had been ordered on a previous night, and D. H. Hill had moved out bag and baggage at the appointed time for a mile or more, but was then halted until nearly day, and then ordered back to his former position. Fortunately the enemy had not discovered his absence—a bit of rare good luck not to have been expected. It was then currently reported that the waiting had been for Longstreet, and as he had not moved out in time for the army to get well away before dawn, it was necessary to return.

Sumner, with 30,000 men, had also come up early on the 5th, but had sat quietly down across the Yorktown road, just out of sight and range. Although in command—for McClellan seems to have considered that the position for the general-in-chief on a pursuit was fifteen miles in rear, and had remained below Yorktown*—he took no part in what was going on around him; and though importuned for aid by both Hooker and Kearney, who were “almost routed,” he declined to part with a man; and when Hancock, finding the empty redoubt on the left, ventured into it, he actually commanded him to return. In fact, he seems to have forgotten that he was in pursuit of what was described as a flying and demoralized enemy, and though himself in command, and holding the van, his chief object on finding the foe seems to have been to let him well alone.

Not so Hancock, one of his subordinates, who was made of sterner stuff, and who had other views of the duties of pursuers of a flying foe; for on the morning of the 5th, between 10 and 11 o'clock, leaving Sumner at Whittaker's, full half a mile or more from the nearest Confederate line, he takes his own brigade and part of Naglee's—five regiments—and ten guns, in all probably over 4,000 men, and learning that one of the redoubts on the extreme left of the Confederate line was unoccupied, he crosses Saunders' pond and marches into it, and then, in the language of the Comte de Paris, “seeing no enemy, he fearlessly proceeded to march into the next.” But on approaching it, he perceives Bratton, with part of his Sixth South Carolina, preparing to oppose him, whereupon, although in far greater force, he halts, falls back, and calls for aid. But Sumner seems to have been in no mood to detain the “flying foe,” and orders Hancock to retire. The latter, well knowing the lucky prize he had found, determined to stay; so falling back from the “fearless advance,” spoken of by the Comte de Paris, to the redoubt he first occupied, he makes his dispositions for a stand, and Bratton, with commendable care, that might well have been imitated that day by others of higher rank, extends a line of pickets from his main body across Hancock's front and into the woods beyond. The latter gets his guns into battery, and occasionally throws a chance shot or shell here and there at a venture, but with but little damage, if any. Thus the day wore on. Towards evening, this artillery fire becoming somewhat annoying to Fort Ma-

* Evidence of Governor Sprague and others before Congressional Committee on Conduct of War.

gruder, 'tis said, although Hancock showed no signs of making use of the position he had stumbled upon, which, in fact, was the key to the entire Confederate line, and opened to the enemy a road to Williamsburg, as well as to Longstreet's rear, D. H. Hill and Early, anxious to have a share in the day's work, asked and obtained leave to assault General Hancock and drive him away. There appears to have been no necessity for this, however, for Hancock's fire had done no damage all day, and was not more harmful now—the fighting was well-nigh over—and he himself was preparing to fall back further for the night. (See Hancock's report, battle of Williamsburg.) The Confederates had beaten off every attack made upon them, and the whole line was to be abandoned before morning. Nevertheless the leave was given, with a charge from General Johnston "to be careful."

Forthwith Hill brings his command to the front. Early's brigade, eager for the first of a hundred battles, coming from the college green at the double-quick through the narrow streets of the old historic town, where the cheers and the tears of the women and the maidens at doors and windows waving adieux as they pass so quickly by, and the unaccustomed sight of dead, wounded and prisoners brought up from the field to which they were hurrying, the rapid motion, the galloping of artillery, couriers and staff, with all the burning excitement of the approach to battle, sent the blood coursing through their veins, which tingles even now as but the memory of it all flushes the cheek and brightens the eye, though eighteen long years have passed away.

The brigade hurries half a mile or more down the Yorktown road, files short to the left, passes through a newly plowed, soft and muddy field half a mile further, and forming into line behind a wood, which screens from sight all beyond, breathless, hot and heavy of foot from rapid motion over such a ground, halts and prepares to load. Thus formed, it consists of the following regiments, counting from the right: The Fifth and Twenty-third North Carolina, commanded respectively by Colonels Duncan K. McRae and Hoke; and the Thirty-eighth and Twenty-fourth Virginia, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Powhatan B. Whittle and Colonel William R. Terry; the Twenty-fourth Virginia being thus on the left, and the Fifth North Carolina on the right. This brigade is assigned to the attack, and the remainder of the division—the brigades of Rodes, Featherston and Rains, with the second com-

pany of Richmond howitzers—is held in reserve close by. Major-General D. H. Hill will lead and takes special charge of the right wing, the two North Carolina regiments; and the Virginians, of the left, will be led by General Early.

Regardless of the rule which places commanding officers in *rear* of the line in a charge, Early, with his staff, takes position in *front* of his old regiment, the Twenty-fourth, and its field-officers, all mounted, do likewise. The order is given to load and then to fix bayonets—and the guns are loaded and the bayonets fixed. In a few words, Early, addressing his men, says they are to assault and capture a battery “over there,” pointing to the woods—and grimly adding, that their safest place, after getting under fire, will be at the very guns themselves, advises all to get there as quickly as possible. Expectation is on tiptoe, and many a gallant heart, in generous emulation, resolves to be the first to reach these guns. With only these few moments of halt to regain breath, the order is given to march, and the line moves forward.*

The generals did not know the position of the redoubt to be attacked, nor even its exact direction from where the line was formed; yet no skirmishers were thrown forward to discover it, nor was any proper reconnoissance made.† The latter might easily have been done, for from the point where Bratton was with the Sixth South Carolina, he had a view of the whole field, and his pickets extended from his redoubt into the woods whence Early’s brigade was soon to emerge. But these ordinary precautions do not seem to have been thought of, and the Major-General, arranging his forces to attack a strong enemy in a strong position, only to be approached across a large open boggy field (in his report he says it was half a mile wide), without knowledge of their numbers or location, and without reconnoissance or skirmishes, sounded the charge and ordered the advance. The disposition of the supports were made with equal lack of skill, for the three additional brigades and the battery of artillery, as brave and gallant soldiers as ever fired a gun, though close at hand, were never brought upon the field at all, and the attack failed for want of their aid. They were ample

* This little halt was even briefer for the writer and his part of the regiment than for the other portions of the brigade. In the run down from Williamsburg, the line had become open and much extended. The Twenty-fourth Virginia was in the rear, and the writer’s part of it in rear of all; so that when the halt was made, and line of battle formed, it was the last to get into position, and had barely time to load before the march forward began.

† Colonel Bratton’s narrative, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, June, 1879, pages 299-300. Colonel McRae’s narrative, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, August, 1879, page 364.

for the purpose, for they outnumbered the foe, and were quite sufficient to have captured General Hancock and his five regiments and ten guns, one and all, who were far in advance of General Sumner, and who could only retreat by a narrow road over Saunders' pond.

From all this want of generalship, skill and care, arose great confusion and greater misfortune. Not knowing exactly the location of the point of attack, it was scarcely possible that the line of battle would be properly arranged with regard to it, and so it happened; for when at last it came in sight of the enemy, instead of the centre being opposite the point attacked, as should have been, with the line moving directly upon it, the extreme left (the left of the Twenty-fourth Virginia) was opposite the battery, and the remainder of the brigade away off to the right, and moving in a direction across the enemy's front. These sturdy old musketeers—some of whom were not inapt military scholars, and by dint of comparing notes, careful observation, and an occasional book or two, had learned as well how a battle should be set in order as many a general officer—understood from the advance being thus commenced without skirmishers, and from General Early's little address before starting, that they were as close upon the position to be attacked as could be, that the charge commenced then and there, that the battery to be taken was just over the wood, a hundred yards distant perhaps, and that they would fall upon the foe in a moment.

With this impression upon their minds, it was difficult to restrain the impatient valor and restlessness of the men as they moved off, but still they advanced across the field steadily, and, preserving their alignment well, though with more rapid step, they entered the woods. Here the miry ground, the dense and tangled undergrowth, dripping with wet, and the large fallen timber, somewhat impaired the line, which increasing excitement, running higher every moment, which was thought would bring them under fire, rendered it difficult for the officers to correct. Still every one pressed forward with all the strength he had left; there was no halting, only greater speed, though every moment less breath and more fatigue. But no enemy is seen yet. They have left the field whence they started, they have traversed the tangled woods down the hill, across a county road, into the forest again and up another slope, but heavy, weary, breathless, and almost broken down, and still no foe is found, although half a mile and more has been

passed. But now light appears ahead, the trees are thinner, and a large open field is seen towards the right and in front. It is there that the redoubt and the battery and the enemy must be. The glorious Virginians press forward towards it, and in a moment more are on the edge of the opening, seeing before them, like a picture, the cordon of Confederate redoubts stretching away to Fort Magruder; that on the extreme left, directly in face of the left of the Twenty-fourth Virginia, is occupied by the enemy, whose entire force of five regiments and ten guns are well advanced in the field directly in front of it. As yet the Confederates have not been noticed. Ah! why were not these brave spirits marched quietly to this point and formed, where all could have seen and clearly understood the work before them! then indeed would it have been done, and well done, and done quickly.

The enemy is seen for the first time; for the first time is seen the battery to be taken. His line faces rather to the southwest, while the advance is from the west. Owing to the unfortunate manner in which the attack was arranged, the Twenty-fourth alone sights the enemy, is much nearer to him, and issues from the woods some time before any other part of the brigade. Immediately upon seeing the Yankees, they spring forward into the open with renewed energy, and remembering the address of Early, who is riding just before them, they press heartily onwards to lose not a moment in closing with those ten guns and four thousand muskets of General Winfield Hancock.

But the wild advance, at such a foolish speed, and over such a heavy ground, had brought disorder on the line. The two middle regiments are not to be seen, and do not issue from the woods at all during the entire action, while the right regiment, Colonel McRae's, does not reach the open until the Twenty-fourth Virginia had been well engaged for some time and was driving the enemy back; and when it does enter the field, 'tis far to the right where no enemy was, and, in fact, in rear of Bratton's line.

Thus, as it leaves the woods, the Twenty-fourth Virginia, alone and unsupported, with both flanks in the air, finds itself confronted by ten guns, defended by five regiments of infantry, with a strong redoubt in their rear. Clinging instinctively to the skirt of woods bordering the field on its left flank, so as to mask its weakness as well as might be, and opening out its files as far as possible to cover the foe's five regiments, these fearless mountaineers break at once into the double-quick and charge with a wild cheer that thrills

through every heart. At once they are heavily engaged. In opening their files, several of the largest companies on the right became detached, and mistaking the redoubt held by Bratton for the objective point, rushed towards it.* But the remainder go straight on, and the brunt of the affair falls upon the left wing, led by the writer, they being closest to and moving directly upon the foe, and receiving the fire both from front and flank. The advanced force delivered a steady volley at most uncomfortably short range and then give way, retreating towards the redoubt. As they retire, the guns, which have already been hurried back, again open; and these Virginians, but a portion of the Twenty-fourth regiment, weary and breathless, already shattered by shot and shell, receive Hancock's whole fire of musketry, shell, grape and canister, as, pressing over the field with undaunted courage, they approach nearer and nearer the foe. None halt or hesitate, but all rush forward with a vigor hardly to be paralleled and now with a silence that would do honor to the first veterans on record, though to many 'tis their first fight. A spirit of death or victory animates every bosom; and mindful of Early's advice, each one anxious to be the first at these guns, they still press on, not so quickly, perhaps, as they would have done had they not been exhausted by their run through field and forest, but still without delay, and the enemy all the while gives way before them, though some of his regiments tarry longer than others.

The leaden hail was fearful; it poured in from front and either flank, and for the first time was heard the barbarous explosive bullet which the Yankees introduced and used. The artillery, too, was well served, and soon both grape and canister were cutting through the wheat with a terribly suggestive sound, carrying down many a brave spirit, and men and officers fell dead and wounded on every side. Yet the advance is maintained; down a slope first, and up again on the further side—still on and on. The regiment soon finds that it is alone; it knows that "some one has blundered," and marvels that the supports are nowhere seen, and that the Major-General, with his part of the brigade, does not appear. Still none falter or cast a look behind. They are pressing the enemy well

* This separation furnishes the explanation of part of Colonel Bratton's somewhat involved account of this affair in the *Historical Society Papers* for June, 1859. He speaks of the "Twenty-fourth regiment" and of "Early's regiment" as if they were two regiments, mistaking these companies thus separated for a distinct regiment. The officer he speaks of as Lieutenant-Colonel Early was doubtless the gallant Captain Sam. Henry Early, of General Early's staff.—R. L. M.

back, though receiving deadly wounds meantime, for his attention is engrossed by this attack, and the Virginians are drawing his whole fire. Gray-haired old Coltraine, of Carrol, that gallant, staunch old soldier, is well in front, his colors already pierced with many a bullet, and men and officers press quickly on unchecked by the murderous fire directed upon them. The ground is soft and yielding; the wheat half knee high, drenched with rain, clings heavily to the legs, and many trip and stumble and sometimes fall. The flag staff is shattered, but Coltraine grasps the staff and cheerily waves the siken folds in front. Away to the right is seen the gallant Fifth North Carolina coming up at the double-quick to our aid, led by that *preaux chevalier*, Colonel Duncan McRae, his horse briskly trotting in advance. A cheer bursts forth and all take heart and still press forward. But the Virginians are much nearer the redoubt, and the enemy, regardless of the approaching supports, still concentrated all their fire upon this devoted band, and with terrible effect. Early's horse has been shot, and in another moment he himself receives a wound, the effect of which his bended form still shows. Terry, too, that gallant leader, ever in the van of many an after battle, has gotten the first of frequent shots full in the face, and the dauntless Hairston also goes down desperately wounded; so the writer, then but a youth, finds himself for the first time in command of his regiment, and the only mounted officer there.* Captains Jennings and Haden, and Lieutenant Mansfield, too, the bravest of all these braves, lie dead upon the ground. Lieutenant Willie Radford, soldier and scholar, has freely given up his young life, so full of bloom and promise, in defence of home and dear native land, and lies with his face up to heaven and his feet to the foe, his noble brow, so lately decked with University honors, now pale and cold in death, and his Captain [afterwards Lieutenant-Colonel Bently], ever present in the field from Manassas even to Appomattox, fell bleeding by his side many yards in front of their company, and Captain Lybrock and Lieutenant Shockley, too, fall wounded to the earth. But no pause is made. Ten minutes—fifteen—have passed while they cross that field of blood, and every other man is down. But the supports are approaching; not all the rest of the brigade, as was expected—or a part of the division, fresh and in order—but only a single regiment, the gallant Fifth North Carolina, who, seeing what odds the Vir-

*The Fifth North Carolina, with all its mounted officers, had not yet gotten up to the more advanced position of the Twenty-fourth Virginia.

ginians were fighting, had, as soon as it emerged into the field and found no enemy confronting them, sought leave to march towards the firing and were now hastening to an awful destruction in their zeal to share that glorious field. The enemy, too, fall back more quickly as they see reinforcements coming up, and run into and behind the redoubt, to which they have all retreated now. Confusion has seized upon them there, for the Virginians are within twenty yards and show no signs of halting. The fire of the enemy slackens, and as their assailants reach the fence of substantial rails with a rider, ceases entirely. The order to their artillery to "cease firing" and "limber up" is distinctly heard, and some of the guns are actually run off; the infantry, too, are in great tumult, their bayonets seem tangled and interlocked, some run into the fort, many make off to the rear, and voices calling to others to halt and stand steady are clearly heard. In a word, General Winfield Hancock's five regiments and ten guns have been attacked and driven in by a single Virginia regiment, and are now on the point of being routed.

As the Twenty-fourth gains the fence just spoken of, the enemy having ceased firing entirely, it pauses a moment to breathe and reform its scattered line, preparatory to a last dash—no man thinks of turning back, for the enemy is retreating before them—and here, too, now are their gallant comrades fresh and eager for a share in the struggle. While the men were in the act of climbing this fence, the writer seeking a gap where his horse could pass, Adjutant McRae communicated to him General Hill's order to retire immediately; whereupon, anticipating that the enemy would reform and open with terrible effect at such short range as soon as the backward movement was perceived, the regiment was obliqued into the woods upon which its left flank rested, and, retiring thus under cover, came off without further damage.

Not so its gallant comrades, who, having advanced with but little loss, and just rectified their alignment behind the fence, were now in perfect line right under the enemy's guns. Their retreat was across a broad, open field; and as they faced about, the foe, quickly rallying and reforming, more than five or six times their number, hurled shot and shell through their devoted ranks with awful destruction. The retreat was the signal for slaughter, and, as Colonel McRae says, the regiment "was scarcely harmed at all *till* the retreat began"—the loss was desperate in a few moments afterwards. [*Southern Historical Society Papers*, August, 1879, page 362.] Before

they recrossed that fearful field, the best blood of all the Old North State fed the fresh young wheat at their feet, and a hundred Carolina homes were cast into direful mourning and distress.

And all for what? Had the regiments been allowed to go on, the redoubt would have been captured without further loss, and held until some one had thought of reinforcing them with part of the three remaining brigades of the division, or with the other two regiments of their own brigade, all of whom were within a thousand yards. If McRae had not come up, and by sending his Adjutant back, furnished the Major-General with a ready messenger, by whom to order the troops to retire, it seems that the Twenty-fourth regiment would have been left, as had already been done, to press forward alone until it reached the works, into which a few might have gotten, as they afterwards did at Gettysburg, in the great charge of Pickett's division, where, by a singular coincidence, the line attacked was in charge of this same General Hancock. Then, as at Williamsburg, a handful left to dash themselves to atoms upon the enemy's entrenchments, while abundant support, stood quietly by and watched the fruitless onslaught.

Well, indeed, might friend and foe write highest laudations of so gallant a charge! rarely equalled, and never surpassed, in all the resplendent record of that ever glorious army. The blow thus delivered, at the very opening of that memorable campaign, not only stunned the enemy—who never attacked again on the Peninsula!—but furnished the whole army with an inspiring example, which could not but have an admirable effect.

The glowing language of General Hill's report has already been cited. Colonel (now General) Bratton, who was an eye-witness of the whole affair [although he seems to have had but a confused recollection of the regiments engaged], says: "The Twenty-fourth Virginia meantime emerged from the wood nearer the enemy than my redoubt, and moved in fine style upon them. * * * I have never on any field, during the war, seen more splendid gallantry exhibited than on that field at Williamsburg." [*Southern Historical Society Papers*, June, 1879, pages 301-2.] And a captain of Her Majesty's Scotch Fusileers, who was in Hancock's redoubt, and saw the charge, made himself known next day to Dr. George T. Harrison, Surgeon of the Twenty-fourth, left at Williamsburg to attend the wounded, saying that he did so because he understood the Doctor belonged to the Twenty-fourth Virginia, and he desired to tell him that during his entire Crimean experience, he had never seen more gallantry displayed upon a field of battle.

Nor were the foes unwilling to declare their admiration or to testify to the impression made upon them by these dashing soldiers.

General Hancock declared that they should have "immortal" written upon their banner forever; and although he had, as already said, five regiments of infantry and ten guns—4,000 men—he called loudly and frequently for reinforcements, which, to the extent of three brigades (Smith's two and Naglee's), General McClellan sent him immediately after his arrival from the rear.* The latter considered this action the most important of the entire battle. He made it the chief subject of his first two telegrams to Lincoln, pronouncing Hancock's conduct brilliant in the extreme (his loss was only twenty). And in his official report, written more than a year afterwards, he characterized it as one of the most brilliant engagements of the war, and declared that General Hancock merited the highest praise! So far from pressing the Confederates, as he had boasted he would do, after this day's work he sat quietly down in the ancient borough of Williamsburg, while these same "demoralized and flying" Confederates sauntered up to the Chickahominy at their leisure, pausing on the route to *reorganize* their regiments whose period of service had expired, and to elect their officers! Nor did General McClellan ever again try the experiment of attacking General Johnston's men.

A few days after (May 9, 1862) the following animated account of the charge appeared in the columns of the New York *Herald*:

* * * "From the sharp fire of our skirmishers in the woods on our left, came the first information of a movement in that direction, and thus put all on the alert. * * * The fire grew hotter in the woods, and in a few moments, at a point fully half a mile away from the battery, the enemy's men began to file out of the cover and form in the open field. It was a bold and proved an expensive way to handle men. Wheeler opened his guns on the instant, and the swath of dead that subsequently marked the course of that brigade across the open field began at that spot. At the same moment also our skirmishers in the field began their fire. Still the enemy formed across the opening with admirable rapidity and precision, and as coolly too as if the fire had been directed elsewhere, and then came on at the double-quick step in three distinct lines†, firing as they came. All sounds were lost for a few moments in the short roar of the field-pieces, and in the scattered

* It is noteworthy, that although McClellan's army was in pursuit of a retiring foe, he himself, instead of being in the van, remained below Yorktown, nearly twenty miles away during the entire fight.—R. L. M.

† A mistake, for the Twenty-fourth Virginia was the only regiment making the attack from this point.—R. L. M.

rattle and rapid repetition of the musketry. Naturally their fire could do us but little harm under the circumstances, and so we had them at a fair advantage, and every nerve was strained to make the most of it. Still they came on. They were dangerously near. Already our skirmishers on the left had fallen back to their line, and those on the right had taken cover behind the rail fence leading from the house to the woods, whence they blazed away as earnestly as ever. Yet the guns are out there, and they are what these fellows want, and in the next instant the guns are silent. For a moment, in the confusion and smoke, one might almost suppose that the enemy had them, but in a moment more the guns emerge from the safe side of the smoke cloud, and away they go across the open field to a point near the upper redoubt, where they are again unlimbered and play away again. Further back also go the skirmishers.* And now for a moment the Rebels had the partial cover of the farm and out-buildings, but they saw that they had all their work to do over, and so came on again. Once more they are in the open field, exposed to both artillery and musketry, but this time the distance they have to go is not so great, and they move rapidly. There is thus another dangerous line of infantry; they are near to us, but we are also near to them. Scarcely a hundred yards were between them and the guns,† when our skirmish line became silent. The lines of the Fifth Wisconsin and the Thirty-third New York formed up in close order to the right of the battery, the long range of musket barrels came level, and one terrible volley tore through the Rebel line. In a moment more the same long range of muskets came to another level, the order to charge with the bayonet was given, and away went the two regiments with one glad cheer. Gallant as our foes undoubtedly were, they could not stand that. But few brigades mentioned in history have done better than that brigade did. For a space, generally estimated at three-quarters of a mile, they had advanced under the fire of a splendidly served battery, and with a cloud of skirmishers stretched across their front, whose fire was very destructive, and if, after that, they had not the nerve to meet a line of bayonets that came towards them like the spirit of destruction incarnate, it need not be wondered at. * * * * *

“This was the fight of the day—a fight that was in itself a hard fought and beautiful battle—a battle in which each side must have learned to respect the courage of the other, and which shed glory on all engaged in it. Different statements have been made as to the enemy’s force. * * * It is probable that there were two brigades, or part of two. One of them was Early’s, and comprised the Fifth North Carolina and Twenty-fourth Virginia regiments and a Georgia regiment, and dead were found on the field in the uniform of the Louisiana Tigers. It would probably be safe to state their force at three thousand.”‡

* The “skirmishers” here spoken of were evidently the main body itself. See General Hancock’s official report of the arrangement of his regiments.—R. L. M.

† The artillery, after retiring, had unlimbered again in rear of the redoubt.—R. L. M.

‡ The Twenty-fourth Virginia did not carry as many as six hundred into that charge. The force of the Fifth North Carolina was about the same.—R. L. M.

In General Hancock's official report, it is stated that the retiring regiments abandoned upon the field one of their battle-flags, which his men found and brought in; but this was not the Twenty-fourth's colors; for trusty old Coltraine never losed his grasp upon his precious charge, and having borne it proudly aloft as well in the advance as the retreat, it to-day droops sadly in the library in the capitol at Richmond, faded, tattered and pierced with many a bullet, but pure and unpolluted by touch of hostile hand.

In his first dispatch to Lincoln, General McClellan states that Hancock had repulsed Early's brigade by a real charge with the bayonet, and this statement is again and again repeated, until Mr. Swinton, generally accurate, amplifi upon it thus: "A few of the enemy who approached nearest the fort were bayoneted"—[Army of the Potomac, Swinton, page 116]—and he adds a note: "This is official." Rather a doubtful verification, seeing the exceeding great difference in those days between fact and official accounts thereof.

Now, doubtless, by all the laws of war, five regiments and ten guns, drawn in line on ground of their own selection, when attacked by a single regiment in the open and unsupported, instead of giving back and retreating (some by orders and some without), or even "feigning to retreat," as Mr. Swinton says (page 116), should have held their ground, and when the venturesome regiment came up, quietly taken them prisoners—or, perhaps, they might have sallied out and captured it as it advanced. And similarly when this numerous force, abandoning the position they had chosen, and "feigning to retreat," had run into and behind the redoubt they were set to defend, five regiments and ten guns should not have allowed two, with unsupported flanks, to approach them within twenty or thirty yards, and utterly silence their fire, without giving them a taste of cold steel.

But so in fact it was. And in answer to General McClellan and Mr. Swinton and others, the writer hereof, who led the charge of "those who approached nearest the fort"; who himself approached it as near, or nearer, than any other of the assailants, and there remained for several minutes; who being mounted had ample opportunity of seeing all that transpired in front; who entered the field as soon as any of his regiment, and left it later than all save those poor fellows who lay upon the sod, affirms that so far from any bayonet charge having been made upon the Twenty-fourth Virginia, that, as already stated, its advance was steady and uninterrupted from the commencement of the action till it reached the fence, and was ordered to retire; that during that advance the

enemy was driven all the while before it, till they reached their redoubt, and that, in fact, the latter never advanced a foot while this regiment remained upon the field. Any charge made by them, therefore, must have been after the Twenty-fourth had retired; and if, as Mr. Swinton says, any of those who approached nearest the fort were bayoneted, it must have been after they were dead, wounded or prisoners.

The only approach to the use of the bayonet which the writer saw or heard of on that day (and his opportunities for knowing all that occurred there were of the best), was when Private Kirkbride, of Carroll, frantic at the fall of his brother, ran down a Federal officer (a captain of the Fifth Wisconsin), and was about to plunge his bayonet into him. Hearing the earnest call of the officer for quarter, across the field above the din of battle, and seeing that there was no time to spare if the man was to be saved, the writer galloped to where he was, shouting to Kirkbride to hold. The officer begging to surrender, tendered his sword, and unbuckling the belt, with scabbard and pistol, asked that he might be put under guard forthwith; but was told that there was no time to tarry for his pistol, and no men to spare for his guard, and he had better get to the rear; and Kirkbride and his companion hastened on. This occurred but a short time before the fence was reached and the order was given to retire, so that the Federal soon after found himself with his friends again, some of whom (General Hancock himself among them, it is believed) sent the writer soon after, by exchanged prisoners, hearty acknowledgments and thanks for saving their comrade's life.

General McClellan, with his usual exaggeration when counting Confederate soldiers, reported that Hancock had captured two Colonels, two Lieutenant-Colonels, and killed as many more. As a matter of fact, he captured none, and the only field-officer killed was the heroic Budham, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Fifth North Carolina, a very impersonation of courage itself. They claimed to have killed the writer also; but in this, as in many other statements, they were greatly in error.

RICHARD L. MAURY,
Late Colonel Twenty-Fourth Virginia Infantry.



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